

THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 76

Largeness in Literature

By

J. W. MACKAIL, LL.D.

President, 1930

July, 1930



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LARGENESS IN LITERATURE

IN so wide a field as that with which the English Association is concerned, the subjects chosen for Presidential Addresses by those statesmen, scholars, and authors who have successively held the position which I am honoured by occupying to-day have likewise been very various. My best chance, I think, of contributing towards furtherance of its aims and efforts is to ask you to consider with me now, and to consider more closely for yourselves, a matter which bears on literature as a whole : which concerns alike teachers and students, authors and interpreters, and beyond all these, the larger and daily multiplying body of those who, not engaged either in teaching or in research, in original production or in formal criticism, are readers: those who seek and find in the exploration, not the exploitation, of their mother tongue and what has been written in it, whether in prose or in verse, whether in the past or at the present, more than the satisfaction of a transitory interest or an idle curiosity; but increase of intelligence, appreciation of art and history, kindling of imagination, interpretation of life.

The world is adrift; and literature, the record and expression of the world's motive forces, is adrift with it. Never has there been a time when production has been so profuse. 'The taught and the untaught, we are all writing' was the half-humorous, half-serious, complaint of Horace; but now the whole nation is taught, and it would seem that not to be writing is becoming a mark either of distinction or of illiteracy. But seldom, if ever, has there been a time when the sense of discontinuity has been so acutely felt or so anxiously proclaimed. Landmarks have been submerged. Rules have been discarded. Tradition has been renounced. The compass has been demagnetized. In itself this is no new thing; the same impatience in the new generation, the same alarm in the generation which is being left behind, has been felt in all ages. The difference now is not in the movement, but in the increase of its volume: an increase in itself very great, but immensely exaggerated by the growing use in connexion with literature of a mechanism akin to that of the loud speaker and the amplifier. New every morning is the hatching of the phoenix. The book of the year has been succeeded by the book of the month, of the week, of the day, and even (as may be read not only in publishers'

advertisements but in critical reviews) the book of the moment. That is perhaps true, but not quite in the sense meant.

It is then as necessary as ever, indeed the necessity is even more stringent, for all who are concerned with literature, as authors, as students, as readers, to recall, and to find anchorage in, those primary maxims on which the art of letters, like the conduct of life, must be based, and in the light of which literature must be practised and studied. These are the *media axiomata* which are the foundations of science; or more closely, the *certa vitae dogmata* of Spinoza, which it is our task and duty in his well-known words 'constantly to apply to the particular cases which meet us'. It is one of these that I would ask you to join me in considering.

To trace it to its origin, or rather to its simplest which is also its earliest formulated expression, we have as usual to go back to Greece. We find it put there with the inimitable Greek simplicity, that pellucid quality which, as our eyes focus themselves on it, is seen to disclose depth beyond depth of meaning; which, to the superficial view often a mere commonplace, is found to be a key-word; which enlarges, expands, germinates, illuminates.

The text for what I shall endeavour to place before you is as brief as it is simple. It is contained in half a dozen words casually and almost parenthetically dropped by Aristotle in the *Poetics*—that fragmentary treatise, or notes for a treatise, which laid the foundations of literary criticism and which, since it was effectively rediscovered in the latter part of the fifteenth century, has been of such immense influence not only on literary appreciation, but on literature itself. *Τὸ καλὸν ἐν μεγέθει καὶ τάξει ἐστίν* are the words. They are rendered in the standard English edition, that of Bywater, 'Beauty is a matter of size and order'. In such a version they sound commonplace enough. But the version is inadequate; they have to be searched into more deeply for their significance. Aristotle is speaking of art, and of the art of letters in particular. Two qualities, such is the import of the sentence, are essential to rightness, to excellence, in any work of art. A work of art includes all the products of the human hand, the human intellect, and the human imagination. It covers, as Plato constantly insists, a house, or a pair of shoes, or a chair, or a table. In the sphere of language it covers not only imaginative literature whether in prose or verse, but all literature; the literature of science, of history, of philosophy. The Muses are all sisters. We may remind ourselves that they are the daughters of Mnemosyne, of Tradition, and the nurslings of Eupheme, the Good Speaker; not the loud speaker, to whose attentions they are now so much handed

over. In the earlier and simpler mythology, they were three only, Melete, Mneme, and Aoide: for their concern was not only with musical speech, with the live voice, but with study and memory; to put it in our more technical language, with research, and with the literature of previous times. In another tradition, recorded by Plutarch, the choir of the Muses included not only Clio the Muse of history and Urania the Muse of Astronomy (of whom Mr. George Trevelyan and Professor Eddington are accepted votaries), but Polymatheia, the Muse of all literature, the patroness of this Association, under whose inspiration it pursues its work.

Excellence then, or rightness, of which our word beauty is an inadequate and indeed a misleading rendering, in literature as in all the arts of life, 'is in', consists of, two things. Of its alternative names I prefer 'rightness': not because it is an English and 'excellence' a Latin word, for we have inherited and naturalized the Latin language, but because it recalls, and may serve to recall to you, an enlightening sentence dropped, much in the Greek manner, by the late W. P. Ker, when he said of a piece of literature he was evaluating: 'It is neither classical nor romantic: it is simply right.'

The two elements in 'rightness' are 'size and order' as the words are usually, but again quite inadequately, translated. We shall get nearer to the meaning latent in the Greek sentence if we let the terms expand, and render the one as largeness or amplitude, the other as structural or organic quality. Between them, they express the aim and goal of that interpretation of life through language which is literature. Each rests on and requires the other. Without structure, largeness, if it could properly be said to exist at all, would spill over and be chaotic. Without largeness, articulation and construction would conversely degrade into mechanism, would lose touch with life and shrivel up. This is the substance of the Greek doctrine.

The two things interlock with one another and are in fact inseparable. But it is only one of them, largeness, that I invite you to consider with me now. It is the one on which the greater stress probably has to be laid at present. The anarchical revolt which preached and practised formlessness has already spent its force. There is plenty of good mechanism going. In fact the development and improvement of the machine is, in literature as elsewhere, a note of the age. But it is the essence of mass-production, and holds good of books as well as of other fabrics, that it is standardized. A work of art—and no writing is literature unless it is a work of art—is an individual creation. The recovery and

maintenance of structure would be futile if breadth of treatment and amplitude of substance were to disappear, or were to cease to be assigned their value. Much able, well-informed, and thoroughly well-meant literary criticism is wasted on work which was not worth doing, and is not worth criticizing.

It is an old maxim of civil law that definitions are hazardous. We need not define largeness in order to apprehend both its meaning and its value. For this, we may perhaps do best by considering instances of it over a wide range; in the literature of other tongues and races than our own; and in our English literature, throughout its accumulated history. But to make the matter clearer, two points may be noted in passing.

Largeness is not size. It is the opposite of smallness; but both are matters of quality, not of measurement. It is the opposite likewise of other qualities which have nothing to do with size; of thinness, of tightness, of labouredness.

Further, largeness implies, both in the artist and in the work of art, a background and an atmosphere. It means the sharing of an ampler air; it has for its background the whole of life. For this, there are no technical rules, no tricks of mechanism that can be learned or practised or explained.

The more that literature is handled as an artifice, the more inevitably it becomes atrophied; and self-consciousness, the weakness of youth, matures into a vice. It may take many shapes, which need not be catalogued; in any or all of them, feeding on itself and looking at its own face in a glass, it is small.

Mass-appreciation follows hard on the heels of mass-production. It is not, to be sure, what is said about a book that makes it one thing or another. But where there are no standards of excellence, there are no standards of judgement. In a single column of a literary journal a little while ago, I noted that the following epithets were applied to productions of the week: arresting, brilliant, amazing, hauntingly beautiful, magnificent, superb. This criticism was not false; it was not even ignorant; it was simply meaningless. The same or similar descriptions would no doubt be given of the next week's product in the next number of the journal. But one description stood out from among the rest as being not meaningless but only false: it was 'Nothing in contemporary English like it'. Approximately, this was the reverse of the truth; but the compass had been demagnetized: the needle whirled about, and pointed where it happened to stand still. 'We happen all at once,' as Mrs. Gregory St. Michael says, 'with no background, in a swirl of haste and similarity.' The phrase is

apt, and stays in the memory, as does the book, one of about five and twenty years ago, in which it occurs.

It is a staggering or a cheering reflection, as we choose to regard it, to think how few of the books which are now happening in a swirl of haste and similarity will be alive six months hence, when their thinness and tawdriness are no longer concealed by a gloss of novelty. It would be idle to deplore this waste profusion; things are what they are. 'If about 5 per cent. of the blossoms develop fruit,' one is authoritatively told by horticulturists, 'the crop is a full crop'; and one of the facts which we must accept and make the best of is the prodigious wastefulness of nature. The nine millions of eggs ascertained to exist in the roe of a single large codfish—a characteristic instance of Nature's profusion and her utter carelessness—are figures beside which all human over-production dwindles to nothing. It is those which survive, not those which perish, that matter. That there are such being produced, works not subject to an ephemeral existence and a swift oblivion, and taking a place in the story with their predecessors, that are large and therefore lasting, I need hardly say: least of all to an Association which counts so many distinguished names among its members. To cite names would be superfluous. Were we to extend our view to those who have secured an honourable place in the fields of literary history and literary criticism, and in the equally large field of study of the English language, other names would crowd in on all of us. But I am not dealing here with the whole compass of studies which the Association has taken as its province; that is to say, with the whole accumulated and fructifying intellectual capital of the nation, of the Empire, and of the English-speaking world. I return to my subject.

Amplitude of substance and art of structure do not always go hand in hand. Where they do, they present us with a classic. When they do not, the result falls short of completeness, of full excellence, of what is simply right. But without largeness, constructive or manipulative skill counts for but little. There are many instances—this need hardly be said—of work on which all the resources of trained skill have been spent, and in which the effective product is that of a machine. But there are other instances, more fertile of suggestion and more stimulating for examples, in which largeness, exaltation, the breath of an ampler air, comes intermittently. To appreciate this, one should look, not to the small fry, but to works of acknowledged merit and fame. Take a great English man of letters as well as a very great historian,

Macaulay. The movement of his prose has the hard precision of a machine. Of that machine he has complete control. Where he falls short of excellence is that he has not largeness, and has not atmosphere. Stroke follows stroke with masterly accuracy, but they are hammer-strokes. This unmodulated hammering is at its full pitch in a well-known passage in his narrative of the Irish campaign of 1689. I will read ten consecutive sentences.

Then the flight became wild and tumultuous. The fugitives broke down the bridges and burned the ferry-boats. Whole towns, the seats of the Protestant population, were left in ruins without one inhabitant. The people of Omagh destroyed their own dwellings so utterly that no roof was left to shelter the enemy from the rain and wind. The people of Cavan migrated in one body to Enniskillen. The day was wet and stormy. The road was deep in mire. It was a piteous sight to see, mingled with the armed men, the women and children weeping, famished, and toiling through the mud up to their knees. All Lisburn fled to Antrim, and as the foes drew nearer, all Lisburn and Antrim together came pouring into Londonderry. Thirty thousand Protestants, of both sexes and of every age, were crowded behind the bulwarks of the City of Refuge.

Hard, tight, leaving nothing unsaid, in an unvaried key, in a mechanical phrasing. There the paragraph would normally stop. But, by some sort of inspiration one might fancy, a window opens, and through it, like a breath of air, comes a single magnificent phrase of orchestrated music.

There at length on the verge of ocean, hunted to the last asylum, and baited into a mood in which men may be destroyed but will not easily be subjugated, the imperial race turned desperately to bay.

Accumulated ornament is a mechanism which Macaulay habitually uses to get his effects. But this is not mechanism, it is something quite different. It is largeness, amplitude, expansion, freedom. After it, the window shuts again, and the hammering is resumed.

Half a dozen opening words may assure us of the largeness of what is to follow, whether that be in the loose structure native to the English temperament, or in the ordered and precisely articulated structure characteristic of the genius of the Latin races. This certainty may be felt alike in the massive chords (like those which open the overture of the *Magic Flute*) of the 'Dieu seul est grand, mes frères' in Massillon's funeral oration on Louis Quatorze in the Sainte Chapelle, and in the softly-cadenced 'As I walked through the wilderness of this world' of the *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Both open out, as it were, straight into a vast background and an immense atmosphere.

Largeness may lie as much in what a writer does not say as in what he says. If this does not come as an instinct, it is a lesson that is hard to learn, if, which is doubtful, it can be taught. There is little more to say about it than what is conveyed in Corinna's advice to Pindar, to sow from the hand and not from the whole sack. Accumulation detracts from amplitude. The most telling descriptions are those in which it is hard to say that anything is described. The greatest volume of emotion is conveyed in the simplest words. Amplitude cannot be either analysed or explained, it can only be felt. It is at once the highest and the deepest, the most certain and the most elusive quality of literature. But even construction, just at the crucial point where it ceases to be mechanical and becomes organic, passes from the sphere of technique into the sphere of vital art, and becomes unteachable. It may be analysed, in works where it exists, and to which it has given shapeliness and proportion, but such analysis (on which scores of treatises are written, and some give glimpses into the truth) only makes it a little clearer what it was that happened; it does not explain how it was done. Design, order, are art, and are creative. Yet at least, so far as we have learned or have taught ourselves to feel the virtue of the masterpieces, we have a standard of what good workmanship is; we know that there is a difference between work that is right, in whatever kind, and work that is not.

If this be so as regards the quality in literature which is to some degree measurable and definable, it is true tenfold of the other quality to which I am inviting your regard. Largeness cannot be defined, as it cannot be taught or explained, any more than the personality of which it is in the last resort the projection. Disraeli, in an interesting letter of 1875 to Lady Bradford, observes that style is that by which the great authors live; which is true, but only if we take it in connexion with Buffon's famous adage, that style is personality—*le style, c'est l'homme même*. But though it cannot be imparted, it can be fostered. Like attracts like—the doctrine had been crystallized in these very words as early as Homer—and through constant intercourse with what is excellent in literature, not only will appreciation increase, but it will more and more cease to be passive, it will strike root and germinate.

Why do we read the classics? By the classics I mean not the Greek and Latin authors, but those works of literature, of any period and in any language, which fulfil the two conditions of excellence; or, to put it in a more familiar form of words which

may bring it more home to us and give us a securer foothold, the books to which we keep continually returning, and which, on returning to them, we continually find to be even greater than we knew.

I omit reasons which are irrelevant; such as curiosity, or an uneasy feeling of duty, or (as all who are concerned with education quite realize) the fact that they are set books for examinations. The right and the relevant reason is that they bring their qualities, and foremost among these their largeness, into our own lives. In the multitude of books, a few, 'seldom coming in the long year set', possess that quality. They are literature in its full, precise, unqualified sense. The rest, whatever their merits or demerits, are (again in the precise and literal sense of the word) journalism: they are of the day and for the day. As such, they have their use, their interest and value; indeed, journalism in that sense might be called the soil out of which literature grows, and it is a legitimate province of higher education, for it is a craft which has to be studied as well as practised. Within its own sphere, it may reach excellence. Much journalism now reaches out towards, a good deal touches, some definitely enters the sphere of literature. That sphere itself is not bounded by any definite line. Its central and enduring brilliances pass, by insensible gradations, into a faintly luminous evanescent haze.

It is the chief glory of English literature that it has a roll hardly equalled in numbers, hardly surpassed in excellence, by those of other languages and races, of works which possess this essential quality of amplitude. In many, perhaps in the majority of these, the other quality, that of order, proportion, construction, is less conspicuous; and sometimes to all intents and purposes absent. There seems to be something in what is called the well-made book, as there certainly is in what is called the well-made play, alien to the national temperament. A nation perhaps, as it gets the kind of government that it deserves, produces the kind of literature that satisfies it. Shakespeare's disorderliness is notorious. No one would call Dickens a master of construction. The curious result is that where excellence of construction does exist, it is apt from its very rarity to be overrated by criticism. *Tom Jones*, that essentially English masterpiece, has often received, in this view though not in others, exaggerated praise. 'One of the three most perfect plots ever planned,' says Coleridge. 'As a work of construction, quite a wonder,' says Thackeray. 'As an example of plot-architecture nothing better has ever been written,' says Raleigh.

As against these may be set a casual sentence of W. P. Ker's, marked by his unfailingly luminous insight, his rightness of perception: 'Compared with *Troilus and Criseyde*, the plan of Fielding's greatest novel is ill-devised, awkward, and irregular.' It does not owe its supremacy to this quality of structure, which is almost incidental to it; but to its amplitude, its immense sanity, the largeness which fills and floods it. It was for this that Gibbon, with a truer insight than the critics I have quoted, bestowed on it his magnificent praise. He singles out in it not its structural skill, but its largeness, its width and humanity, in the famous sentence: 'The romance of *Tom Jones*, that exquisite picture of human manners, will outlive the palace of the Escorial and the imperial Eagle of the House of Austria.'

He calls it a romance, and he calls it exquisite. Both words are deliberately chosen and precise. Fielding himself claimed for it, humorously yet with a serious meaning below the humour, the name of an epic. But it is a romance, in virtue of its low tension, its expansiveness, even now and then its garrulity. It is exquisite, in the proper sense of that much misused word, as the careful distilled product of several years. Its looseness of articulation, its episodes, its superficial carelessness, are an art superimposed on nature:

Yet nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean.

The triumph of art is when the exquisiteness, the distilment, is complete, but retains the largeness in which it worked. And it is a sign of vital quality in such masterpieces that, without jar and without apparent effort, the tension can alter, the key can change, and concentrated magnificence melt into fluent ease. Atmosphere, and its largeness, are of all types: from the luminous transparency of Newman's *Grammar of Assent* to the loaded gorgeousness of Carlyle's *French Revolution*; or from the silver-grey tone of Jane Austen to the thunderous atmosphere of *Jane Eyre*, with thirty years and a whole world between them. Of whatever type, it is what tells and what satisfies.

An illustration may be taken from Scott, whose artistry is usually undervalued because it is so unstudied, so instinctive, and so erratic. Structure is a thing which he habitually and quite consciously neglected. But as has been well said of him, 'the superficiality and slightness of his work are deceptive; the character is given inevitably and indescribably'. Thus, when the theme demands, he can with seeming unconsciousness put into a piece of faultless modelling and proportion all that precision and

intensity with which more conscious artists endeavour to permeate their whole fabric. Two celebrated passages in *Rob Roy* are instances. One, the meeting in the moonlight on the road to Aberfoil, is often and perhaps not unjustly singled out as the one scene in which Scott reaches the summit of what art can do. The other, which may well be set beside it, is the scuffle in the dawn in the last chapter, following on the two words that cost two lives. In both, the concentration and precision (the last two qualities one ordinarily looks for in Scott) are as remarkable as the ease with which they rise out of and emerge into their context, the artlessness, one might say, of Scott's art.

Let me call attention here to another case, on a large scale, in which the largeness of Scott has been very often, I think nearly always, unrecognized or misinterpreted. The usual criticism made on that acknowledged masterpiece, *The Heart of Midlothian*, is that it sinks into commonplace at its conclusion. This is not a modern cavil: Lady Louisa Stuart wrote to him at the time, 'I know you so well in it! You grow tired yourself, want to get rid of the story, and hardly care how.' In the unsophisticated child's mind through which we of the older generation made our first acquaintance with it (as I hope and think the new generation are beginning to do once more), we took it all for granted; it was part of the story; things happened thus and thus: we were reading a saga, not an epic. The transmutation of saga into epic is a further step in art, as the sense of how epic and saga differ and are on different planes is the product of a critical insight. But when we have learned to discriminate, and apply our new measurements to the work of art before us, we are apt to fall into the error of wanting it to be something different from what it is, and being disappointed with it because it does not fit in with the pattern we would impose upon it. Only much later do we learn as a lesson what we had once felt and then forgotten, that the work is what it is because it was so created. In *The Heart of Midlothian*, *finis coronat opus*, the ending rounds off the whole. It sets the vivid and splendid action which we have been following in a wider air against a larger background. It links it with the life of a nation. Not only does it give the quiet-coloured end of evening to a crowded, tense, and poignant day; it places that day as one among many, as an eddy in a ceaseless current. It leaves us in a new generation, in a new world, in which things that are past are done with, and seem in retrospect to be as the fierce vexation of a dream. The ending of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* will occur to you as an interesting parallel. Something of a similar aim seems to be behind much work of the

present day, but frequently on mistaken methods, if in such a thing method is not an essential mistake. Where background should give stillness it gives restlessness, where atmosphere should give expansion it gives confusion. Largeness cannot be given, it is only lost and becomes what Thomas Hardy called 'a spasmodic inventory of items, which has nothing to do with art', by accumulation of subsidiary detail. Atmosphere only clogs and stifles where it is a cloud of dust. In dramatic compositions there is a tendency or a fashion to make the stage-directions bulk more largely than the drama; and in fiction something analogous is done on an even larger scale. The attempt is made, not to present action or emotion, but to talk about them: to hand out or ladle out, ready-made, all the accessories which happened to accompany the action, and all the psychology of the person who experienced the emotion. Even more; the author cannot keep himself (or herself) out of the story and let it make its own impression; he must needs unload, at prodigious length, all the raw material that was in his own mind, and that should have been left there. That is fatal to largeness. It is fatal to permanence. It is fatal even to immediate effectiveness. Largeness means simplicity. Permanence means solidity. Effectiveness means keeping to the point.

It is here that we do well to go perpetually back to the classics in their more restricted sense: for they, as nothing else quite does, set a standard, which, once realized, cannot ever be quite ignored or quite forgotten.

That standard is incidentally a corrective to the confusion between size and largeness: for in Greek and Latin may be found, most eminently and most impressively—the more impressively because unimpaired by the passage of many centuries—instances of the utmost largeness in the briefest compass. It would be as needless as tedious to particularize: yet I may mention, as palmary instances, the thirty lines or so in which Herodotus describes, once for all, the battle of Marathon; the couplet in which Simonides crowns for ever the heroism of Thermopylae; a single stanza (that beginning *flere desine*) of the epithalamium of Catullus; the prayer offered on the night of the 31st of May 17 B.C. for the Roman people by the Emperor Augustus. We perhaps realize largeness more vividly when it comes thus concentrated. May I venture to go even a step further? If the eight lines of Mr. Housman's *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries* were laid in one scale of the balance, and the whole prodigious mass of 'War-books' in prose and verse were laid in the other, which would weigh more? Which would give the greatest amplitude, the utmost exaltation,

to what matters in literature as in all art, that is, in one word, to life?

But to get such largeness thus, in so small a compass, is a sort of miracle. It happens, or one might fancy it impossible. Space is what is naturally expected or demanded for it; and in fact spaciousness is very nearly a third synonym for largeness and amplitude. *Laxum spatium res magna desiderat*, 'great matter requires free space', one of the weighty maxims of Seneca, expresses a truth. The *Iliad* is larger in both senses than its greatest passages, the *Aeneid* than all its pathetic half-lines and lonely words and famous episodes. *Paradise Lost* is larger than the summoning of the fallen host, or the picture of the happy garden, or the wholly miraculous description of the archangel's eye sweeping the celestial hemisphere 'from Libra to the fleecy star that bears Andromeda far off Atlantic seas', although all these have largeness in an eminent degree. But the Senecan aphorism must be taken together with its context. Spaciousness is gained, he goes on, by removing what is superfluous: and by removing it not merely from the work, but from the mind. 'To know more than enough is a kind of intemperance'; and to say more than enough really means that one has not much to say. A story, as Hardy says, must be worth the telling. So too, conversely, the search for the right word, *le mot juste*, tends to defeat its own object. The right word is valueless, is a mere curiosity, if it is not the word for the right thing. If it is, it comes (as Keats says), as naturally as leaves to a tree.

There is a no reason now, any more than there ever has been, to despair of the commonwealth of letters. Restlessness is in fact a sign of vitality, as pain is a sign of resistance to illness. It was when the golden age of Latin literature was approaching that the haughty and melancholy cry was uttered: 'They have forgotten to speak Latin at Rome.' The bitter lines

Heaps of huge words uphoarded hideously
With horrid sound, though having little sense,

were not, as one might imagine, written this year or last, but in 1591, just when the full splendours of the Elizabethan age were kindling and multiplying. Milton feared that the age was too late, that the art of letters had perished. Pope, in one of the most splendid passages of English poetry, speaks much as he might do now, of signs following signs, of mystery seeking a vain refuge in mathematics, of truth buried in casuistry, of art after art going out. But literature, being a function of life, is, like life itself, continually

dissolving and renewing itself. It is natural for the new generation to think that they have for the first time found out the secret not revealed to their predecessors. It is as easy, and less excusable, for the expiring generation to fancy that their own sunset is the precursor of universal darkness. What is perishable will perish; what is imperishable will survive.

The world that was adrift is already on the way to regain anchorage. Literature is releasing itself from nightmares. Sanity is gaining ground. So rapid is the movement, that the flaring lights of a few years ago are already burnt out or guttering in the socket. Paroxysmists, impressionists, symbolists, imagists, contortionists, vorticists—the list of queer names might, I suppose, be indefinitely extended—have had their little day. More than two hundred years ago, in 1724 to be accurate, complaint was made of the ‘affected delicacies and studied refinement’ of modern writings. These have been replaced, not to our advantage, in a good deal of recent work by affected indelicacies and studied grossness. It was very recently that a laudatory notice of a new work, in a journal of some standing, contained the singular commendation that ‘the story writhes with repulsive life before our eyes’. But the filth collected from the gutter by the man (or by the woman) with the muck-rake is ceasing, if it has not quite ceased, to be attractive; night sucks it down, the garbage of the pit. Meanwhile, high over the confusion, the large lights continue to burn.

It is over sixty years since that Matthew Arnold, in one of the loveliest of his poems, drew, with a few of his rapid adroit touches, a picture of the Bacchanalian riot of what was then the new age. That was the age which is, I believe, temporarily numbered among things rejected or forgotten: it was the mid-Victorian period of the sixties. There would seem little in that period now to be excited about; but it took itself, and was taken, then very seriously and caused many searchings of heart.

Thundering and bursting
In torrents, in waves,
Carolling and shouting
Over tombs, amid graves,
See, on the cumber’d plain
Clearing a stage,
Scattering the past about,
Comes the new age.

That sounds very modern, very much up to date, does it not, now? Well, the mid-Georgian period in which we now are, and which is making such a very loud noise through the amplifiers,

will in due time secure its due place. What, of its literature, will survive permanently, it does not rest with us to judge, nor does it much concern us to know: some, we may feel sure, will. It may possibly be remembered and recorded less for its creative achievement than for the wide diffusion and the keenness of its interest in literature, for its scholarly explorations, its organized research, its reasoned catalogues. Of one thing we may be certain, that its permanent legacy to the future will be those works, be they more or fewer, which in their largeness embody and interpret the largeness of life, the amplitude of the world, the greatness of the human soul. Apart from these, its literary product will share the fate of its Ford cars, and mass-production disintegrate into mass-oblivion; but out of its submerged realm will come the sound of bells.



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